

VZCZCXRO4951
RR RUEHLN RUEHPOD RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHMO #2489/01 2331537
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 201537Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9600
INFO RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHVK/AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK 2918
RUEHYG/AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG 3279
RUEHLN/AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG 5034

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002489

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#) [RS](#)

SUBJECT: Public Chamber Discusses Potential War Crimes in South Ossetia

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) Russia's public chamber -- a largely Kremlin-appointed consultative body of civil society organizations -- formed two committees to address questions about the conflict in South Ossetia, both of which met on August 20 to discuss their two-day exploratory trip to Vladikavkaz and Tskhinvali on August 14 and 15. While many of the commentators hewed to the official line about "genocide" and condemned Western reactions and coverage of events, some of the more thoughtful members raised questions about press freedom (seen as hindering Moscow's ability to get its side of the story out) and the dangers of over-dramatizing the events. The session marked perhaps the first public discourse, not just on the conflict, but on the Russian government's policy and approach. End Summary.

A Familiar Litany

¶2. (SBU) The meeting kicked off with a video compiled by the committee members who traveled to South Ossetia. Accompanied by suitably somber music, the video showed footage of refugee camps in North Ossetia (predominantly female and children) and of wounded victims (primarily young males). Committee Chair Olga Kostina, founder of the victims' right organization "Resistance," gave commentary during the film and then opened the session with a general overview of the trip to Tskhinvali, saying that things had been grim when they arrived on 14 August, but trucks with relief materials arrived on the 15th. She noted that the materials from the investigative commission would be posted as early as August 25 on the Public Chamber web site.

¶3. (SBU) Aleksandr Brod, the head of Moscow Bureau for Human Rights gave the main report on alleged war crimes in South Ossetia, saying that the committee had collected a hundred interviews with witnesses that described Georgian forces as using military force against civilian targets. He reported that the committee had handed their findings, including photographs and video materials, to the Russian Prosecutor's office. He also made reference to possible Russian war crimes against Georgian citizens, but did not make any elaborations. Brod also alleged that Georgian forces had kidnapped dozens of South Ossetians, who had not returned to their families. He further promised that the Public Chamber committee planned to publish a book about their findings.

¶4. (SBU) Other speakers at the table - including the head of the "Politics" fund Vyacheslav Nikonov - blasted Western media for a "disinformation" campaign, which he alleged sought to hide Georgian war crimes and to whitewash Russian criticism of President Saakashvili's actions. He claimed that had Russian soldiers not gotten involved in the crisis, then the "genocide" of South Ossetians would never have come to light. He dismissed statements

by Human Rights Watch Tanya Lokshina that reported that the Tskhinvali hospital had reports of no more than 40-some deaths, and reasserted that a thousand, maybe more had perished.

Other Voices Heard as Well

15. (SBU) Other members of the committee, however, took a more objective approach and raised questions about the Kremlin's conduct of the war. Maksim Shevchenko, a journalist on Russia's Channel One government television, warned against overdramatizing the situation, noting that he had witnessed genocide in the Balkans in the 1980s and that the situation in South Ossetia did not reach those proportions. Instead, he posited a more "measured" argument that Georgian forces, by firing on innocent civilians without cause, had committed war crimes and could thus be held liable. He further underscored, however, that South Ossetia and Abkhazia were not a part of the Russian Federation and thus not liable to Moscow's legal mechanisms. Lastly, he noted the risks of referring to the conflict in South Ossetia in terms of inter-nationality conflict, particularly given Russia's past transgressions against North Caucasus nationalities. Finally, in commenting about the perception that Russia appeared to have lost the "information war," Shevchenko argued for broader press freedom and greater access to information would have helped Moscow to make its case -- a comment that drew scattered applause from the assembled journalists.

16. (SBU) Bishop of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians, Sergey Ryakhovskiy, similarly criticized Moscow's policies as counter-productive. He lamented that no international aid organizations, including Protestant church organizations in the U.S., had been invited to play a role in providing aid. Instead, all support efforts flowed through the government's Emergency Ministry, without any recourse for independent action. He noted that his co-religionists in the U.S. and other countries had no

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reason to believe Russian claims about genocide, without being allowed to make their own observations about the conditions there.

17. (SBU) Alla Gerber, the President of the Russian Holocaust Fund, complained about the use of the term "genocide," noting that it took international recognition and clear evidence of a desire for eradication - like that which befell Europe's Jewish population under Hitler. (Indeed, perhaps because of her position on genocide, Gerber was not informed of the departure time for the plane to Vladikavkaz and South Ossetia and thus was not a member of the delegation to the region.) Gerber also raised concern about the use of conscript troops in Russia's military force in Georgia, since conscripts by Russian law are not to be employed in peacetime to combat operations.

Comment

18. (SBU) Despite disagreements on the terminology for what happened in South Ossetia and debate about the Russian government's failure to get its message across, there was general agreement that war crimes of some sort had taken place in Tskhinvali and warranted investigation, even from the more pro-Western members of the Public Chamber committee. As their findings become public knowledge, with an expected web site showing testimony and material evidence, we can expect more public retrospection on the events and, most likely, a strong push by the Public Chamber and the Russian government to appeal to international organizations as a means to draw world attention to the alleged war crimes.